

Clean water is a fundamental necessity of life. While most of us are fortunate to have access to clean water, hundreds, if not thousands, of people suffer serious illnesses and other health problems every year due to contaminated water. Tragically, many people are unaware that they have been consuming contaminated water until it is too late.

Fortunately, we have become more knowledgeable about the health risks posed by contaminated water and have taken aggressive action to protect both our natural and man-made water sources at both the federal and state levels. In addition, people have been able to hold those entities accountable for negligent or intentional conduct that has polluted our water and caused harm. Contaminated water continues to be a problem across the country.

## Common Causes of Water Contamination

Water contamination can occur in a number of ways and from a variety of sources. The contamination may be due to dumping contaminants directly into a water source such as a lake or river. It can also occur when ground contaminants leach from ground-level dump sites into the water table or other water sources, such as fertilizers and pesticides running off of fields and into rivers. It can be caused by contaminated pipes and water tanks. It can be accidental, such as in the case of a fuel spill, or in many cases, it is intentional but covered up.

Some of the most common causes of water contamination include the following:

- Marine dumping
- Atmospheric deposition such as "acid rain" where contaminants are brought to earth by way of the atmosphere
- Inadequate or negligent treatment of sewage and wastewater
- Chemical run-off from agricultural or industrial sites
- Dumping or negligent storage of industrial waste
- Urban development that strains existing water and sewage systems
- Leakage of underground storage tanks

- Fuel or chemical spills such as the Exxon Valdez or BP oil well accidents
- Hydraulic fracturing or “fracking,” which can cause contamination of groundwater and other water source

Some of these causes are due to negligence of someone unaware that their storage tank is leaking or we simply not recognizing the risks or potential hazards. Many other cases are intentional. The entity responsible for the contamination is well-aware of the dangers of its actions but chooses not to take action to avoid contaminating nearby water sources. In some cases, they refuse to change course even when they know that people who have been exposed have suffered serious health problems.

## Signs of Contamination

Here are some of the most common signs that your water may be contaminated:

- Visible sediment
- Cloudy water
- Brown or orange hue
- Oily film on top of your water
- Metallic taste
- A chlorine or sulfur (rotten eggs) odor
- Rusted silverware
- Food and beverages have an odd taste

You should be especially vigilant if there has been a reported case of water contamination in your area. While the signs may not be present in your home or where you work now, that doesn't mean you haven't necessarily been exposed.

## Symptoms of Illness Caused by Water Contamination

Unfortunately, many people are unaware that they have been exposed to contaminated water until they start experiencing the negative effects. There are a wide variety of symptoms that people experience when they have been exposed to contaminated water. Prolonged exposure may manifest itself in severe, systemic illnesses, while short-term exposure (such as drinking highly contaminated water) may present more acute symptoms. If you suspect that you have been exposed to contaminated water and are experiencing any of the following symptoms, you should

seek immediate medical attention:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Stomach pains or aches
- Intestinal pains or aches
- Fever
- Weakness
- Dehydration

## Health Issues Caused by Water Contamination

There is a broad spectrum of illnesses and health problems that are caused by drinking, bathing in, or otherwise being regularly exposed to contaminated water. Here are some of the more common health issues that can arise from long-term exposure to contaminated water:

- Birth defects, sterility, and other reproductive issues
- Developmental delays or impairments in children
- Various types of cancers, including lymphoma
- Skin rashes and diseases
- Stomach or liver problems
- Respiratory ailments
- Neurological disorders

Tragically, many of these illnesses, such as lymphoma, are not discovered until they are [terminal](#). Even if the illnesses aren't terminal, the people who have been exposed face a lifetime of serious health issues and potential disabilities.

## You Have Rights

When it comes to water contamination cases, there are two important federal laws that you should be aware of:

The [Clean Water Act](#) is a statute that bans the discharge of pollutants into water sources such as rivers, lakes, ponds, or the ocean. The Act allows the federal government to set standards for things such as wastewater disposal and establish permitting programs for entities discharging potential pollutants into water sources. Under the Clean Water Act, private citizens can file a lawsuit for suffering physical harm caused by violating the standards imposed by the Act.

The [Safe Drinking Water Act](#) is a federal statute that was enacted to protect Americans' right to safe drinking water. The Act authorizes the federal government to establish standards for drinking water in order to regulate levels of naturally occurring and man-made pollutants. Where the Clean Water Act focuses on our nation's water bodies, the Safe Drinking Water Act is focused on protecting our public water systems. A "public water system" is one with at least 15 service connections that serve a minimum of 25 people for at least 60 days per year. As a result, a private well may not be covered by the Safe Drinking Water Act.

While federal law does create important protections for those who have been harmed by contaminated water, it is important to note that the agencies tasked with enforcing these laws often lack the resources to be as aggressive as they need to be to ensure our safety. One of the most important features of these laws is the fact that they empower private citizens to take action if they believe they have been harmed as a result of contaminated water.

## High-Profile Water Contamination Cases

While these cases can be challenging, the good news is that it is possible for victims to pursue legal action and recover significant compensation. Many cases are litigated as [class action lawsuits](#) or in Multi-District Litigation, which provides plaintiffs with greater leverage when dealing with massive corporate or governmental entities. Here are some examples of cases that resulted in massive settlements for people who were affected by contaminated water:

- [The Flint, Michigan water crisis](#) - one of the most well-known cases of recent water contamination, more than 40 percent of water samples collected contained "very serious" levels of lead contamination. Water samples also contained elevated levels of TTHM, a cancer-causing chemical. [Water contamination in Flint](#) also caused the third-largest outbreak of Legionnaires' Disease in United States history.
- [Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics Corporation](#) case involving water contaminated by perfluorooctanoic acid ("PFOA") in Vermont. 500 class members were awarded \$34 million in damages. \$26.2 million was to be paid to compensate homeowners and \$6 million was ordered to fund a health monitoring program over the next 15 years.

- [Hoosick Falls, New York](#) water contamination case – another PFOA case, where 1,800 homeowners were awarded a \$65 million settlement. Saint-Gobain was a defendant in the case, as well as Honeywell International and 3M.
- Another PFOA contamination case in [Petersburg, New York](#) resulted in a \$23.5 million settlement. Local plastics company Taconic Plastics contaminated the area’s water supply when PFOA was released from their plant’s smokestacks, exposing hundreds of homeowners.

These are just a few mass tort cases where lawyers have helped people across the country receive compensation for their illnesses. In addition, some of these lawsuits require the parties responsible to rebuild or redevelop various systems and participate in ongoing monitoring in order to guard against future contamination.

## Camp Lejeune Water Contamination Cases

One of the most well-known examples of water contamination cases involves the [Camp Lejeune Marine Corps base](#). From 1953 to 1987, hundreds of thousands of marines and their families were exposed to various toxic contaminants found in the water system. These people suffered severe health issues, including lymphoma, miscarriages, and leukemia as a result of this exposure. Some studies suggest that over 75 toxic substances were found in Camp Lejeune’s water system at 240 to 3400 times levels that are deemed safe by current water safety regulations.

The Camp Lejeune water contamination cases highlight just how challenging these cases may be. Initially, the government denied any link between the illnesses suffered and the base’s water system. The government claimed to address potential issues while continuing to dump and dispose of toxic waste in a manner that was simply unsafe. Lastly, those who were exposed to the contamination and suffered ill effects have been hampered by legal challenges such as the statute of limitations, making it nearly impossible to get the compensation they need.

The Camp Lejeune cases have gained such notoriety that the United States Congress passed the Camp Lejeune Justice Act in August of 2022. The Act made it easier for veterans, their families, and civilian workers to pursue claims who suffered illnesses due to exposure to contaminated water while at Camp Lejeune, many of which were previously barred. The Navy has reported that more than 5,000 claims were filed in the first month following the Act’s passage.

## What to Do if You Suspect That You Have Been Exposed to Contaminated Water

The first thing you should do is seek a thorough medical examination. Tell your doctor that you believe you have been exposed to contaminated water, and be forthright about any symptoms that you have experienced. If your doctor

does not make a diagnosis, you should continue to monitor your health closely. You should also seek a second opinion if you are experiencing symptoms.

You should also consider contacting a lawyer who handles water contamination cases. They will be able to evaluate whether you might have a claim and help you understand your options.

The most important thing is to take action. Procrastination or delays can make it more difficult to pursue a claim and may actually jeopardize your rights. If you suspect that you have been exposed to contaminated water, educate yourself, understand your options, and seek the help you need.